WALT WHITMAN'S CONCEPT OF THE AMERICAN COMMON MAN

BY

LEADIE MAE CLARK

A.B., University of Illinois, 1945
A.M., University of Illinois, 1945

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1952

URBANA, ILLINOIS

1952

WALT WHITMAN'S CONCEPT OF THE AMERICAN COMMON MAN

BY

LEADIE MAE CLARK

A.B., University of Illinois, 1945
A.M., University of Illinois, 1945

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1952

URBANA, ILLINOIS

1952

R. UNIV.
BIBLIOTHEEK
LEIDEN

WALT WHITMAN'S CONCEPT OF THE AMERICAN COMMON MAN

This dissertation is an attempt to discover what Whitman considered the native American man. Since he never explicitly defined the term, I have examined Whitman's prose and poetry seeking clues to a definition. The prose works written before 1861 have been of inestimable value, for they demonstrate the differences in the Whitman presented by the prose and the Whitman presented by *Leaves of Grass*. The endeavors of various Whitman editors have brought to light a great store of material which undermines the claim that Whitman's American common man was all-inclusive. It is now evident that Whitman was anti-Irish in the 1840's. He wrote that America should receive all immigrants to her shores but his heart belonged to the native free-born American. In the 1870's he still expressed the views that America should welcome all but he felt that filth and poverty were foreign importations and confined primarily to the immigrant groups. During the Civil War, Whitman exulted in the nativity of the army and praised the clean, untainted stock from which the army sprang.

However, Whitman was not antagonistic toward all foreigners. Although he did not care for the Irish or for Catholics, he recognized the superior qualities of the Italians, probably because he believed that the native American opera would be patterned upon Italian models. He tolerated the Spanish-Americans in the Southwest since he felt they dwelled in a region peculiarly suitable for them. He welcomed the Germans enthusiastically since he felt that in America Anglo-Saxon stock would be revitalized into the divine average through a new political, social, and moral philosophy. His concept of the native American man centered itself in the Anglo-Saxon freeholder.

Consequently, Whitman saw no place in America for the

Indian or for the Negro. The Indian was a splendid aborigine who must disappear, leaving behind him his past and his aboriginal place names. The Negro, too, must disappear for Whitman felt that he could never succeed in a white civilization. Slavery remained for him a moral issue since he could not admit the possibility of free Negro labor competing with white labor. He never became wholly reconciled to the presence of the Negro in the Union army. Whitman believed that a superior race of men had been evolved and all lesser breeds must therefore be eliminated.

Whitman thought of woman as the perfect mother. Women should be physiologically sound, athletic, cheerful companions to men. Their destiny lay in their potential motherhood. He celebrated in prose and verse the motherly woman.

Leaves of Grass demonstrates the same limitations in Whitman's universality. The immigrant is mentioned only in a brief catalogue and nativity is made the first mark of excellence. The Indian is hailed as the man who must vanish. There are no glimpses of the free Negro, and woman is celebrated as the mother of men.

Whitman's philosophy was a philosophy for the future, and even in *Democratic Vistas* he exalted the common man to come. The poet-prophet would be the teacher of personalism. Literature would teach the Anglo-Saxon common man what he should be and would foster spiritual democracy. But since all who lived in America were not eligible to become the divine average, Whitman offered a theory of inequality as well as the theory of the equality of souls. Hence, it is better to seek another basis for establishing the fame of Whitman. His peculiar lyric gift will insure his position as a first ranking poet. His frank celebration of physical America and his experimentation with free verse will insure his position as an American poet.

VITA

Leadie Mae Clark was born October 1, 1925 at Cairo, Illinois. She graduated from Urbana High School in 1942 and entered the University of Illinois from which she recived the Bachelor of Arts with honors in English in 1945 and the Master of Arts in English in the same year. She has taught at Clark College, Atlanta, Georgia, and is at present a member of the faculty of the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina, Greensboro. She held a University fellowship for the academic year, 1951-52.